

EXHIBIT

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How the False Story of a Gang 'Takeover' in Colorado Reached Trump

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Dilapidated apartment complexes in Aurora, Colo., have become a cause célèbre for right-wing media and former President Donald J. Trump, after the landlord claimed a Venezuelan street gang had taken over.

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By [Jonathan Weisman](#) Photographs by Michael Ciaglo
Reporting from Aurora and Denver, Colo.

Sept. 15, 2024

Mike Coffman, the conservative Republican mayor of Aurora, Colo., said he was at home on Tuesday night watching the presidential debate and bracing for the worst.

And then there it was again, before tens of millions of viewers: former President Donald J. Trump, describing Mr. Coffman's Aurora, a sprawling suburb just east of Denver, as a city under siege, terrorized by migrants.

"They're taking over buildings," Mr. Trump said. "They're going in violently."

Mr. Coffman was contrite on Thursday as he told that story. After all, he had helped create the tall tale now sully his city's reputation.

Before Springfield, Ohio, before the misinformation about devoured pets and the memes of Mr. Trump rescuing ducks and kittens, there was Aurora, pop. 404,219, supposedly overrun by the violent Venezuelan street gang, Tren de Aragua. Those claims became a cause célèbre for the right-wing media, and ultimately a key focus of Mr. Trump's anti-immigration repertoire as he [escalated his attacks on immigrants](#) as part of his campaign's effort to capitalize on voter concerns about the [southern border crisis](#).

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Caught in the middle are a number of migrants, living in dilapidated apartments that Aurora officials now call squalor, amid “criminal elements,” not widespread gang activity, and unable to find or afford better. The buildings are nonetheless at the center of a national firestorm.



“Because of one or two Venezuelans who wanted to do something wrong, we are now all accused of something,” said Yorman Fernandez on Friday. Mr. Fernandez, 29, lives in one of the troubled complexes.

“Because of one or two Venezuelans who wanted to do something wrong, we are now all accused of something,” Yorman Fernandez, a 29-year-old Venezuelan who lives at one of the properties, said on Friday, between jobs painting and roofing. “We are not all the same.”

And Mr. Coffman has had to reverse his own rhetoric as he watches Mr. Trump, the presidential candidate he still said he would reluctantly vote for in November, continue to stoke fear in his community. Meantime, the mayor has started a crusade to try to undo the damage Mr. Trump is inflicting.

“I mean, I agree with him on a lot of policies as it pertains to immigration,” Mr. Coffman said in City Hall on Thursday. “But I’m also the mayor of the City of Aurora, and my job is not only to make sure that the city is safe, but also to protect the image of the city.

also the mayor of the City of Aurora, and my job is not only to make sure that the city is safe, but also to protect the image of the city. This narrative out there is exaggerated, and it's our responsibility to correct it."

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How the claims about Aurora began



Mike Coffman, the mayor of Aurora, initially helped spread the misleading claims that Venezuelan gangs had taken over parts of the city. He has since backtracked, trying to rehabilitate Aurora's image.

As far back as May 2023, Aurora officials had been trying to force an out-of-state landlord to fix up three blighted apartment complexes in the downtrodden East Colfax Corridor, which connects the cities of Denver and Aurora.

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In July 2024, the landlord, CBZ Management, which says it is based in Colorado and Brooklyn, offered a new argument for why it couldn't repair the buildings: Venezuelan gangs had taken over, and the property managers had been forced to flee.

Mr. Coffman and a Republican City Council member, Danielle Jurinsky, quickly repeated CBZ's unverified claim in interviews.

"We have areas in our city, unfortunately, that have been taken, and we have to take back," Mr. Coffman told a local talk radio host on July 31.

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On Aug. 5, a public relations agent, Sara Lattman, hired by CBZ, pitched a "tip" to the local Fox television network affiliate in Denver.

"An apartment building and its owners in Aurora, Colorado have become the most recent victims of the Venezuelan Gang Tren de Aragua's violence, which has taken over several communities in the Denver area," she wrote on Fox 31's tip line, according to an email obtained by The Times. "The residents and building owners of these properties have been left in a state of fear and chaos."

But it was a viral video that [began circulating in late August](#) that shows armed men in the hallway of one of the complexes that ultimately caught Mr. Trump's attention. The incident was reported as a connection to gang violence, particularly the Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua, though documentation was scarce.

On Tuesday, the Aurora Police Department announced it had arrested 10 members of Tren de Aragua on charges of "felony menacing," attempted first-degree murder, assault, child abuse, domestic abuse and others. But Todd Chamberlain, Aurora's new police chief, could not say whether any of those men were among those seen in the video, or whether any in the video had actually done anything criminal.

Still, the clip, taken by a resident and played on endless loops on



those seen in the video, or whether any in the video had actually done anything criminal.

Still, the clip, taken by a resident and played on endless loops on [Fox News Channel](#) and the [website of The New York Post](#), metastasized into grandiose stories of whole buildings, whole sections of town and, in Mr. Trump’s telling, the whole city of Aurora being taken over by migrants carrying weapons of war.

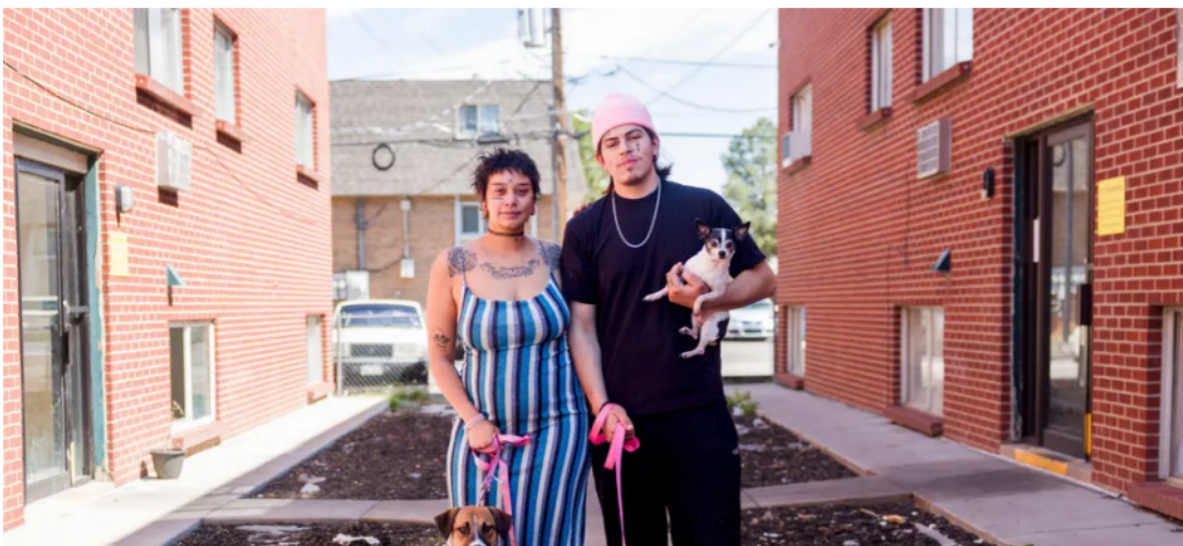
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“And getting them out will be a bloody story,” Mr. Trump said of Aurora [at a rally in Mosinee, Wis., last Saturday](#), adding that it was “not going to be easy, but we’ll do it.”

Mr. Coffman and Ms. Jurinsky have both since backtracked.

“The overstated claims fueled by social media and through select news organizations are simply not true,” they [wrote in a joint statement released Wednesday that appeared aimed at pushing back on Mr. Trump’s debate comments](#).

A false story, fueled by real problems





Star Lopez, left, and her husband Luis, who live in the complex where the viral video was filmed, spoke of roach infestations, long stretches without electricity or running water, a refrigerator that barely works and no landlord to communicate with or even pay rent to.

The claims about Aurora were spun out of real issues.

The Denver area has struggled to deal with an influx of about 40,000 migrants, many of whom had been sent inland by Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas. The soaring cost of housing, acute in Denver, had brought many of those new arrivals to Aurora looking for somewhere cheaper to live — right to those same ramshackle apartments the city was already fighting to get cleaned up.

On Thursday, one resident of the complex, Star Lopez, 29, was gingerly walking her three dogs through a tiny stretch of dirt and weeds — and piles of dog feces — between two of the buildings where the video was captured. Inside the nondescript three-story brick structures, flies swarmed. Most apartments had broken windows, no screens, and doors ajar with no functioning locks or even doorknobs.

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Nadeen Ibrahim, organizing director for the nonprofit East Colfax Community Collective, a social service organization in the area, warned of bedbug infestations and rats.

But there were no armed men blocking passage or extorting rent or protection money, Ms. Lopez said, despite what conservative



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But there were no armed men blocking passage or extorting rent or protection money, Ms. Lopez said, despite what conservative media has said. Most of the residents at this point are squatters.

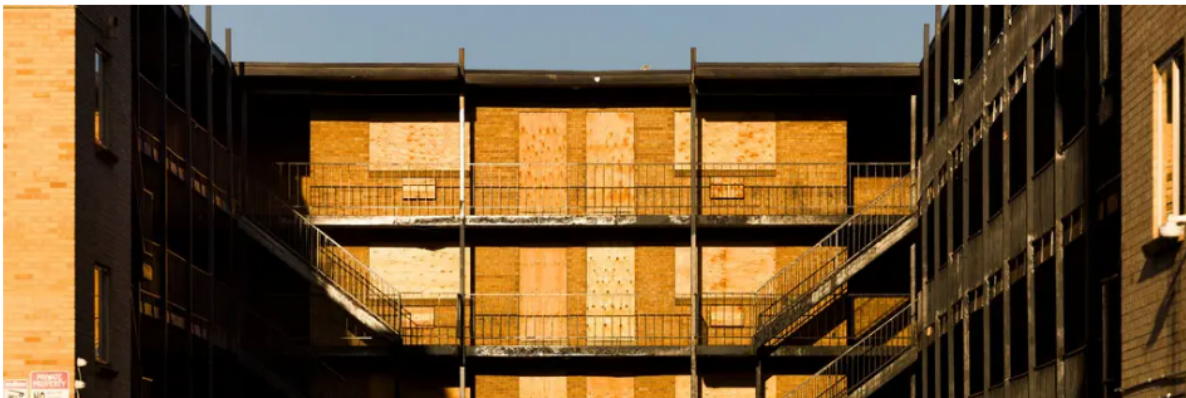
“Oh, it’s taken over, but it’s taken over by everybody,” Ms. Lopez said, freely admitting she hadn’t paid rent since November, and adding that most of the neighbors hadn’t either. “It’s survival of the fittest.”

Ms. Lopez is pregnant, hoping for a Christmas baby, she said. Her husband, Luis Lopez, 22, said he works in a warehouse and won’t let his wife walk the dogs at night until he comes home from the late shift. It’s too dangerous. They spoke of roach infestations, long stretches without electricity or running water, a refrigerator that barely works and no landlord to communicate with or even pay.

Nearby, an onlooker from Colorado Springs who declined to give his name gawked and took pictures. He was at the Department of Veterans Affairs hospital nearby and “thought I’d stop by,” he said. “I was expecting to see vigilantes all over the place, people on the rooftops with machine guns.”

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The effects





The Fitzsimons Place apartment complex, run by CBZ Management, is one of three that Aurora officials had tried to force the company to fix up as far back as May 2023. The complex, which sits on 1568 Nome Street, is now closed, its windows and doors boarded up.

After the video of armed men went viral in August, Mr. Coffman recalled strapping on a bulletproof vest — “I looked like the Michelin Man” — to pay his first visit to the building where it was filmed. He saw nothing but frustrated renters pleading with him to intervene. When he next held a town-hall meeting with renters from the apartment complexes, he didn’t bother with security.

But the story has taken on a life of its own. Mr. Trump placed Aurora front and center on Friday in his plans for mass deportations if elected.

“We’re going to have the largest deportation in the history of our country,” Mr. Trump said at a news conference at Trump National Golf Club in Rancho Palos Verdes, Calif. “And we’re going to start with Springfield and Aurora.”

There have already been real-world consequences to the fear-mongering, exaggerations and outright lies spreading on the internet and the campaign trail about the situation. Last month, [the city shut down one of the buildings](#), Fitzsimons Place apartments, at the center of the controversy, emptying it of nearly 200 inhabitants — many, but not all, of them migrants and recent arrivals. City officials and police officers arrived at 7 a.m. Aug. 7, the first day of school, to announce that the residents of 1568 Nome Street had six days to clear out.

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Rehousing people has been a struggle.

Fear and negative publicity have pushed landlords to stop renting to Venezuelan migrants, said Crystal Murillo, a city councilwoman. Legal aid groups representing tenants and social service nonprofits struggling to house whole families say they are overwhelmed. YouTube personalities and TikTok stars prowl city slums. A white supremacist called into the City Council's public comment period on Monday evening, spewing hate against Venezuelans and Jews.



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“This doesn’t compare to any crisis that we’ve ever experienced,” said Emily Goodman, senior manager for housing assistance at the nonprofit East Colfax Community Collective, a social service organization in the area.

The mayor blames his initial statements on information from the Aurora police that was too credulous in repeating the property owner’s excuses.

“The pattern of problems are with one — really, I’m going to be real blunt, I guess — out-of-state slumlord,” he said.

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The city has now filed several civil and criminal actions against CBZ and the man officials identified as the landlord of the apartments, Zev Baumgarten.

Stan Garnett, Mr. Baumgarten's lawyer, insisted that Mr. Baumgarten had no ownership of the property and no management role and was merely a consultant for CBZ.

A lawyer for CBZ, Matthew C. Arentsen, said that his "clients believe that, at its core, this case is not about property mismanagement but about government failures."

Mr. Chamberlain, the police chief, said he believed that the situation at the properties was now under control. The department is shifting to supporting the Venezuelan community with youth programs and safety outreach — and trying to ensure that its law enforcement efforts do not target the entire migrant community.

"We cannot get myopic or get focused based upon a knee-jerk reaction to something that is very titillating or very out there in the public right now," he said.

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Across the street from one of the properties, Whispering Pines, three men sat on their front porch Thursday afternoon shouting at a reporter and a photographer not to believe the "fake news" about the place. Sure, there is crime and probably some gangs, they said, but in this neighborhood those had been there well before the Venezuelans arrived and will be there long after they depart. What they wouldn't do is give their names.

"I'm not messing with Donald Trump," one man said, shooing the reporter off the property.



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City of Aurora code enforcement officers walking through an unlit hallway in one of the apartment buildings at the center of the national firestorm.

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A version of this article appears in print on Sept. 16, 2024, Section A, Page 12 of the New York edition with the headline: The Real Consequences Of Trump's False Claims About Colorado's Gangs. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

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Document title: How the False Story of a Gang 'Takeover' in Colorado Reached Trump - The New York Times

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